

Iraq: Problems remain, but progress is made

By U.S. Rep. Charles W. Dent

Albert Chowansky Jr. exemplifies the spirit and sense of purpose reflected by American civilians working and serving in Iraq. A Frackville, Schuylkill County native who left the coal regions in the late 1970s to study engineering at Drexel University, the well-traveled engineer is now managing the construction of the Taza power plant near Kirkuk in Northern Iraq.

This natural-gas powered generator, which Albert calls MOAG – short for the “Mother of all Generators” – is tangible proof of the positive reconstruction efforts proceeding in Iraq.

Visiting Iraq, I saw efforts to rebuild a country not just from a recent war, but from decades in which its people and its natural resources were raped and ravaged by an evil tyrant, Saddam Hussein.

As part of a bipartisan, four-member congressional delegation that visited Kirkuk, Basra, Baghdad, and Kuwait, I witnessed this and just a handful of the thousands of other coalition construction projects over four days.

I marveled at the accomplishments of the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, under whose auspices much of this massive construction continues.

Simultaneously fighting an insurgency, reconstructing a nation and assisting in the development of a constitution is a daunting objective. Security is intense – most of the time we wore body armor and helmets and were protected by heavily armed personnel.

Nevertheless, I left Iraq feeling optimistic and hopeful that the slow, gradual pace to normal life in much of Iraq is progressing – not without setbacks and heartbreaking loss of life, but still with purpose and determination.

Rebuilding a battered nation

The transporting of MOAG is a story all by itself. Moving a nearly 500-ton piece of equipment 600 miles from Jordan across the dangerous Al-Anbar province in Western Iraq to Kirkuk by convoy is testament to the extraordinary logistical capabilities of the U.S. military.

After a few ineffective but still troubling mortar attacks that landed near the power plant, Albert worked with regional ethnic and tribal leaders to form a local workforce, equitably distributing jobs among Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Tukomeins, and Kurds. The project is nearly complete and there have been no more attacks. These are the circumstances under which the reconstruction of Iraq's infrastructure is occurring.

Our delegation spent time in the Southern Iraqi province of Basra, at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. We visited the nearby port at Umm Qasr and rode with the Iraqi Navy in speedboats through the harbor. The Iraqi Navy is actually a Coast Guard of 800 sailors trained by the British Royal Navy and tasked with harbor security and with the protection of oil platforms in the Persian Gulf.

Flying with the British Army in a Merlin helicopter, we viewed the marshlands near Basra. These marshes were originally twice the size of the Everglades, until Saddam Hussein drained them as retribution to the "Marsh Arabs" who rose up against him after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Saddam displaced and killed tens of thousands of these people whose civilization had lived in this ancient homeland for 5,000 years.

It may again be possible to grow crops there, although it is unknown if we can ever fully undo the environmental terrorism of the deposed Iraqi leader.

Militarily, the Basra Province is relatively quiet and is one of 14 out of 18 provinces that have seen progress with comparatively less insurgent activity than in some areas. The Royal Marines'

regional commander, General Jim Dutton, was quite confident in the capability of the Iraqi Army in this region.

Our delegation flew into Baghdad via U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopter a few hundred feet above the ground and escorted by Apache helicopters. From our view, we could see oil pipelines and bridges across the Tigris under construction, along with vacant gun embankments and bone-dry ditches everywhere.

Political progress in Baghdad

In Baghdad's Green Zone, our delegation met with General John Abizaid and General George Casey, respectively the military commanders for Southwest Asia and Iraq. The generals presented a sober yet hopeful analysis of the insurgency. There is not one insurgency but three disparate groups: disgruntled Baathists, Sunni extremists and "rejectionists." The Sunni extremists are the most dangerous because they include domestic and foreign Al Qaeda affiliated insurgents.

Every month, 3,000 insurgents are captured or killed (mostly captured). General Casey said 180,000 Iraqi security forces are trained and equipped, and that number will be more than 200,000 come January.

The delegation met with embassy officials for an overview of political reforms and progress on the constitutional convention that was occurring just down the street. Federalism, the role of Islam, women's rights, and control of the country's premier resource, oil, are among the issues to be resolved. All sides are dedicated to reaching an agreement. The American role in the process is not to impose a solution, but to facilitate discussion and present options.

We also had lunch with the American-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce and later met with three judges overseeing the Special Tribunal on War Crimes – who will try Saddam Hussein for crimes against his people. The judges impressed me with their knowledge, wisdom and dedication to the establishment of an independent, impartial judiciary.

Our troops and the reality of war

In Kuwait, we witnessed the up-armoring of American vehicles and the massive logistical support operation that dispatches convoys of 800 trucks per day, carrying everything necessary to support an engaged military.

More than 20 percent of the trucks carry water. Army Major Steven Miscenzski, an Easton native, was among the Pennsylvanians supporting this effort. I dined with Steve and other Keystone State natives at Camp Arifjan.

Throughout the trip we ate in the mess halls with soldiers and Marines whose morale was exceptionally high considering the 125-degree heat – while wearing full body armor. The food was good and plentiful; veterans of previous wars would be envious.

At every stop along the way, I was able to share some generosity of the people of the 15th District. I handed out phone calling cards and Gatorade mix packets to our troops from Pennsylvania and elsewhere. These items were donated by the Dexter and Dorothy Baker Foundation and a drive led by Chapman resident Dottie Niklos of Blue-Star Mothers through the Lehigh Valley Military Affairs Council. The gifts were well received by our troops.

Leaving Kuwait, we flew home via Ramstein Air Force base near Frankfurt, Germany. There we visited wounded troops in the Landstuhl military hospital.

Many of the troops were wounded in Afghanistan as well as Iraq. At Ramstein, I briefly boarded an Air Force plane carrying wounded troops back to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C. On this plane I met a young Marine, Travis Gray, who was a fellow Allentown native! Travis was in good spirits, and I called his mother shortly afterwards to give her a report on his condition.

The harsh reality of war struck me hard as I stepped off the plane carrying Travis and his fellow comrades to make way for the

two final passengers – two unconscious, critically wounded soldiers.

Watching as the two were boarded was an emotional time, as 12 airmen methodically and gently lifted their stretchers and life-sustaining medical equipment onto the plane.

Final Thoughts

I left Iraq feeling proud of the Americans serving there. The transition from Saddam's Iraq to a new country — establishing representative government consistent with the country's tradition, heritage and culture — has been at times painful, grueling and difficult. Nevertheless, our military's perseverance is inspirational, just as is the effort of our civilian personnel. Their dedication to their work and mission is extraordinary.

Many people ask me when American troops will leave Iraq. I cannot give a precise answer. It is my belief there will be a military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. The question is how many troops will be required and under what circumstances will we be there.

Like all Americans I want our troops to come home safely. Like most thoughtful Americans – no matter how they viewed the circumstances leading up to the war or how it's been conducted – I understand that leaving prematurely without better stabilizing the country could yield catastrophic consequences.

That said, as the political and military situation stabilizes and improves, the American presence in Iraq will diminish. For now, it's a matter of patience and will.

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